

17: Hellson & Gadd E,N-4,5 (1970-1973) 1974 NF6 Blackfoot NF6

Part II

PLANTS USED IN BIRTH CONTROL

Overview

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● [847]

The Blackfoot owned ceremonial bundles which were used to produce and prevent fertility. Our records indicate that botanical ingredients were used only to prevent conception and for the performance of abortion.

[p.56]

BIRTH CONTROL

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[842]

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In the matter of birth control, the Blackfoot practiced it in two ways. Conception was thought to be avoided through the use of a special ceremonial bundle and abortions were performed with the aid of an herbal brew. The former required the services of a diviner who professed the power to prevent conception while the latter was an event that could be accomplished by the mother alone.

[126]

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Several of these anti-conception bundles, constructed between 1880-1930, have been collected and the authors reported of at least fourteen more on the reservations of the Blackfoot, still being used by elderly diviners, all women.

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[386]

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There is a consistent pattern of bundle contents (see Figs. 27 & 28); otter-skin wristlets each with an incised bone bead, the design representing a snake; yellow ochre in a skinbag; and a quantity of pulverized plant material in another skinbag. An exception to this pattern is the bundle collected by Ewers which contained a beaded, snake-shaped belt and lacked wristlets.

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A woman seeking conception control would approach a diviner for instruction in the use of the bundle. The diviner would, for a fee, use her bundle on the patient or make one for her. Without going into the details of the ceremony, we should note that the major part of the ritual involves the ochreing of the body from the head down to the navel and from the feet to the knees, thereby isolating the reproductive area. The wristlets were worn for a prescribed period during which time the patient was enjoined to observe certain taboos. The ceremony was usually performed in the spring when the snakes emerged from hibernation.

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[778] Samples of the pulverized plant material from two separate bundles have been identified as the flowers and leaves of new birch suckers (*Betula occidentalis*). Informants bear out this fact and explain that a decoction of this material is taken as a drink in the event that the power of the bundle to stop conception fails.

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[778] Informants have identified at least three other plants which were used to cause abortion: Anemone multifida, "crooked stem", and Draba incerta.

[778] As far as we know, though, they are not associated with any bundles.

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On the topic of childbirth, the plants listed below were used to induce and/or speed delivery.

ACHILLEA MILLEFOLIUM

An old woman would brew the leaves for a woman that was going to have a baby. When she drank it, she started having pains and as the pains got worse, she would drink more. Then she would deliver.

The brew is also drunk to expel the afterbirth. The pattern is to drink it and rub it on the affected part.

ANEMONE PATENS

The plant is boiled and drunk by women to speed delivery.

CAMASSIA QUANASH

The women will drink the decoction of the root to induce labor.

HIEROCHLOA ODORATA

A tea of sweet grass is taken to stop vaginal bleeding after birth and to help expel the afterbirth.

ARTEMISIA CAMPESTRIS

[847] Women will drink the decoction of the leaves to abort difficult pregnancies.

844 POPULUS TREMULOIDES824278

The bark was scraped and the scrapings brewed for women about to give birth.

"COCK-TAHH"

The infusion of the root was given to women in the preliminary stages of labor to speed the birth. The baby was bathed in the solution right after, which gave it additional strength to survive.

OSMORHIZA OCCIDENTALIS

A drench of the infused root was taken by women to induce labor.

SELAGINELLA DENSE

One old lady used the decoction of the plant to induce labor while others used the plant to expel the afterbirth.

PHYLOLA spp.

Women would drink the infusion of the leaves and root to expel after-birth.

LYCODESMIA JUNCEA824278[743][757]

Pregnant women drank a decoction of "oot-squeks-see" (blue sticks) for symptoms resembling heartburn.

PHYSARIA DIDYMOCARPA

● [847]

Women would drink the infusion in small amounts to abort.

202

The Ways of My Grandmothers

685 to get mad at her because she would sneak bread into their bed and leave crumbs all over the inside of it at night.

178 Today a young girl would laugh if her parents told her whom she had to marry. She would probably fight her brothers if they told her how to dress and behave. The law would be after those brothers real fast if they cut off her nose as punishment for bringing the family disgrace by being loose in public. And I wonder how many young men would be able to come up with enough horses and other goods to satisfy the parents of a potential good bride. Yet these are the customs that my grandmothers knew and lived by until just a few years ago.

ON PREVENTING CHILDBIRTH

842 One thing that many young women like to find out about my grandmothers' ways is how they kept from having children; what were their natural birth control methods. Tribal history and family records show us that childbirth was not much controlled in the old days. Some people were unable to have children, including several very famous men of the past. But among all the rest of the people it was common to see eight, ten, or twelve children in every household. As you know, nature regulates childbirth by age, health, food supply, and so on. Our people were usually content with that. Keep in mind that the old life was hard and dangerous, and infant mortality often ran high. Also there was lots of land and generally lots of food for all that could manage to live.

847 I have heard about some plants and herbs that were used
824 to prevent childbirth. Often they caused a pregnancy to be
759 terminated, rather than keeping one from happening. The men and women who administered these things were powerful people who had a lot of knowledge to go with their herbal medicines. I don't know anybody like this that is still living.

Around the Household

203

I myself have never been treated by such a person for such a matter. So I won't be able to say any more about it.

There was another way of preventing childbirth that I will mention just for your interest. My grandmothers have told me that the kind of spiritual powers needed to make this way work are no longer existing today. The last of the people who were involved in these traditions are about gone.

This other way did not usually involve herbs, just strong faith in the powers of certain spirits. The ones who had these powers would make up symbols of snakes or butterflies, which were considered powerful in childbirth. These were given to women who wanted no children. They had to wear them all the time, next to their bodies. For instance, snakes were made from buckskin, stuffed, and worn like a belt. The stuffings were of special materials, and the snake bodies were specially covered with beadwork and sacred paints. Often the women were instructed to stand over a smudge of special incense, so that the smoke could rise up their bodies. They had to do this every night for as long as they wanted no more children.

I heard of one man who lived long ago with famous powers dealing with childbirth. He would make a stick-figure drawing of a man on a certain woman's blanket, and she would have no more children. If she changed her mind and wanted children, he would just sit on her blanket for a while, to change the magic.

*WOMEN'S SAGE**(Artemisia Frigida)*

One plant in the world of Blackfoot botany was left practically for the exclusive use of the women. For that reason it was called women's sage. A companion plant was called man's sage, because it was used mainly by men. Both kinds

applied as a poultice to boils. Covered with a 757
bandage, the seeds dried up the boil, which 824
pulled off when the bandage was removed.
The roots of the rose bush could be brewed
into a bitter, red-colored drink to treat diar-
rhea.

CUT-LEAVED ANEMONE (*Anemone multifida*): 824

This plant is called "looks-like-a-plume," be-
cause of the wooly tops of its fruiting heads.
This wooly material was burned on a hot coal 757
and inhaled for headaches.

INDIAN HEMP (*Apocynum cannabinum*): 824

Known as "little blanket" or "many spears,"
this plant is usually found in dense brush and
on high cliffs. The roots were brewed to 757
make a laxative or a hair wash. The dried 515
leaves were sometimes smoked. 276

LARKSPUR (*Delphinium*): Known as "blue
leaves," the leaves were brewed for kidney
troubles; the brew also made a good eyewash. 824
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LOCOWEED (*Oxytropis*): These plants are
known as "rattle sounds," because the ripe
seeds inside the pods rattle in the wind. The
leaves were chewed and the juice swallowed
for sore throats and for coughing spasms in
children. A brew was also made to treat sores
on the head.

MINT (*Mentha arvensis*): The leaves of wild 824
mint, or "strong smell," are still brewed into 757
a popular tea, which is especially good for [272]
upset stomachs. When chewed and swal-
lowed, the leaves are effective for chest pains.

OWL CLOVER (*Orthocarpus luteus*): These 824
plants were given the name "dye" because 386
they were boiled with porcupine quills,
feathers, and skins to dye them red. The blue 757
seed pods that form after the yellow leaves 824
fall off were boiled into a drink and given to
adults with chest pains and to children with
constipation.

PRAIRIE CROCUS (*Anemone patens*): This 824
plant came to be known as "early old man,"
because it matures and dries up quickly. The 844
small root of the plant is still brewed and 847 •

[p. 187-A]

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drunk to ease delivery at birth or to bring on an abortion. The crushed leaves used to be bound to itchy parts of the body.

PRAIRIE SMOKE (*Geum triflorum*): Called "lying on its belly" because its roots grow along close to the ground, it is still dug up, scraped, washed, and then crushed and boiled to treat sore throats, as well as sore, swollen, or snow-blinded eyes. The roots can be crushed and mixed with melted grease to treat sore gums, or mixed with melted kidney fat as a drink to treat ulcers. This kidney fat mixture can be applied to body sores such as chapped lips, blisters from riding, and sore nipples from nursing. The leaves are also brewed for a person spitting blood. Finally, ripe seeds gathered from the white flowers can be crushed to make a perfume.

PUFFBALLS: Known as "dusty stars," these fungi are thought to be the remnants of fallen stars, which dot the Prairies. The puffy substance, used to catch sparks, was an essential part of fire-making kits. Puffballs were also held against bleeding noses to stop the flow, and applied to cuts on horses. The yellow contents were brewed for a drink to treat hemorrhage. They were also used as a compress for hemorrhoids, and by women while menstruating.

SAGE (*Artemisia gnaphalodes*): "Man-sage" had many uses in addition to those already cited by Atsitsina. The basis of a decoction for treating coughs, its leaves could be chewed to stimulate appetite. It was also a main source of "toilet paper" in the Old Days. Burning leaves created a smudge to drive away flies and mosquitoes; soft leaves placed in nostrils checked bleeding. And it sometimes was added to dried meat for seasoning, although it was not actually eaten.

SAGE (*Artemisia frigida*): "Woman-sage," which grows together with man-sage, was used by women in the same way men used man-sage, except that women used it addi-

21: Hungry Wolf F-4,5 (ca. 1972) 1977
 , NF6 Blackfoot NF6
 Blood

to many medicine mixtures because of its sa- 824
 credness. Boiled in water, it made a hair [78]
 wash; chewed, it would be applied to swell- [182]
 ings. It looks much like other grasses, but can [77]
 be distinguished by the reddish color near its [515]
 base.

VIOLET (*Viola adunca*): Called "blue [757]
 mouth," its leaves were chewed and used as a
 poultice; it could also be made into a brew
 for a child having difficulty breathing. 824
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WESTERN MEADOW RUE (*Thalictrum occiden- 827
 tale*): This plant was named "Gros Ventre 824
 scent" because it was most commonly found in
 the country of that tribe. Used as a perfume, 302
 the leaves could also be powdered and placed 232
 in horses' noses to make them long-winded.

WESTERN WILD PARSLEY (*Lomatium simplex*): 824
 This is the "big turnip" that was used mostly
 as food. As a medicine, the root was 752
 chewed and placed as a poultice with a 757
 heated cloth on bloodshot eyes. This poultice
 also treated sores in the mouth and ears, as
 well as earaches and swollen ears. A brew was
 made from it for chest pains.

WHITLOW GRASS (*Draba verna*): Because the 824
 stem of this plant rises from a circle of small
 leaves, it is called "center grass." The roots 747
 of this plant were made into a bitter drink to
 bring on abortion.

WILD BERGAMOT (*Monarda fistulosa*): This 824
 plant is called "singly young man." The blos- 757
 soms could be brewed to make an eyewash,
 or else both leaves and blossoms were brewed
 together for stomachaches.

WILLOW (*Salix*): The great variety of willows
 are generally called "what they bring," refer- 824
 ring to their ceremonial use during the Medi- [757]
 cine Lodge sweat baths. The deep roots of [232]
 these bushes were cut into pieces and dried,
 and from that a brew was made for hemor-
 rhage, difficult breathing, dandruff, and
 bloodshot eyes in people and horses. Boiled 515
 with kidney fat, the mixture was used as a 826

THE FATHER IMAGE IN BLOOD SOCIETY

197

cepting for the sons of the rich—and they were a decided minority—skill in hunting and warfare and courage in the face of danger were the musts for survival. In a word, self-reliance was the aim and basis of training.

And self-reliance was as necessary inside the home as outside it. Not that the Blood lacked affection for their offsprings, or a desire to support them. Many observers have commented most positively on both these traits. But the dependence on the hunt and war for food and gain, the frequent movings from place to place, made the rearing of children a difficult matter. Many stories are told of newborn infants "thrown away," left to die in the bushes, either because they could not be cared for on the march, or because raiders might hear their cries and thus be led to the camping ground, or because a mother had died in childbirth (the lot of the orphan, and even the half-orphan, was, and still is, far from enviable).

It was also considered desirable to limit the number of children. Two years was the standard interval, but the longer the time between siblings, the more parents demonstrated their love for the child previously born. Moreover, abortion carried no stigma. Magic help for this purpose could be easily secured from an authorized female practitioner, and as a special favor, a stop could be put to childbearing altogether. Revealingly, barrenness is never given as a cause for divorce in this competitive society where women are highly prized as property and sex objects, and where marriage is notoriously unstable.

The hunt and war often and for extended periods took the Blood father away from home. And these absences, however necessary, were a continual threat to a child's security. For whether justified or not, and frequently he was justified, a husband was quick to suspect that "the worst" had happened while he was gone.²¹ A child often heard his mother accused of adultery, often saw her beaten, and not infrequently deserted. Whatever the ultimate solution of familial disagreement, the child invariably was the sufferer. Even if his parents remained together, he often sought refuge with a nearby relative to avoid further scenes of violence. If they separated and he went with his mother, as he usually did if he was still "young," his sense of belonging might be rudely disturbed again. For often when his mother remarried, she left him with

²¹ Among the Blood jealousy was and is obsessional. Many a husband approaching his end threatened to kill his wife, for only if she accompanied him on his final journey would he be sure that he alone would possess her in the next world. The only Blood confined to an insane asylum, whose case was not complicated by physical causes, attempted to murder his wife because he believed she was having intercourse with a ghost.